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ABSTRACT

This article outlines an approach to creating a Web-supported, hybrid, first year language course using WebCT software. Beginning with a statement of the pedagogical rationale for the project and an explanation of what is meant by a hybrid course, the article traces steps in the course development process. A brief summary of the suite of course design tools made available by WebCT software is then followed by suggestions for hardware and other support material needed in order to successfully implement a Web-enhanced course. Following some ideas for organizing course content and materials, the article shifts to a discussion of general principles of Web site design and then focuses on an overview of a successful working model for first year French language courses at Auburn University, Alabama. It concludes by offering a number of resources for additional help and support for instructors who may wish to create similar hybrid language courses at other institutions. (SM)

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An Outline for Designing a Hybrid First Year Language Course with WebCT

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An Outline for Designing a Hybrid First Year Language Course with WebCT

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Auburn University

This article outlines an approach to creating a web-supported, hybrid first year language course using WebCT software. Beginning with a statement of pedagogical rationale for the project and an explanation of what is meant by hybrid course, the article traces steps in the course development process. A brief summary of the suite of course design tools made available by WebCT software is then followed by suggestions for hardware and other support material needed in order to successfully implement a web-enhanced course. Following some ideas for organizing course content and materials, perspective shifts to discussion of general principles of web site design and then focuses on an overview of a successful working model for first year French language courses at Auburn University. In concluding paragraphs, the article offers a number of resources for additional help and support for instructors who may wish to create similar hybrid language courses at other institutions.

Pedagogical Rationale

During the past fifty years, continuing research in second language acquisition has prompted an evolution in pedagogical trends in the field. Focus has shifted, for example, from traditional grammar and translation, with emphasis on reading and writing skills, to audio-lingual activity using repetition and drill to encourage aural and oral skills. In recent years, instruction has centered on task-based, communicative activity and assumed a more balanced approach aiming at a level of proficiency in all of the language skills.

Steady advances in technology have paralleled these shifting trends in foreign language pedagogy and have equally impacted classroom experience. From records and

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films, to reel-to-reel tapes, to audio and video cassettes, technology has progressed to internet and digitization. The capacity to digitalize audio and visual material, and to disseminate information through the internet, has effectively removed barriers to first-hand, authentic interaction with other languages. Students can access written documents: from literature, history, and journalism, to instant messages. They can listen to sounds of music, poetry, and radio. They can see video clips, news reports, and make virtual tours of museum exhibits, homes, and towns. All of this is available in most of the world's languages with a computer terminal, an internet connection, and a few clicks of a mouse.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, web-enhanced, or hybrid, courses offer a number of advantages to both student and instructor. This kind of course design creates an autonomous learning environment in which students are compelled to interact with course content. At a minimum, students can be exposed to a myriad of cultural sites that encourage virtual exploration of places, investigation of historical and current events, introduction to and communication with people of other cultures. Additionally, web-based course components, such as self-directed and self-corrected activities move focus away from the instructor and toward student-centered learning, thereby extending the classroom experience and allowing students to progress at various, individual motivational and achievement levels. Responding to the recognized fact that all students have preferred ways of learning, web-enhanced courses can provide multiple formats to accommodate a diversity of learning methods and strategies. Students needing or desiring additional help or practice with skill development can take advantage of links and supplemental content pages that will allow them to perform those activities at times that are flexible and individualized. Students also benefit from facilitated contact and

interaction, with others in the class and with the instructor, through the various forums of chat, discussion groups, and in-class email. With course software tools, instructors can offer prompt feedback to students through individualized, online grade reporting and can also allow them to know how their individual performance compares to others in the class. In general, access to course components and tools offers students greater sense of control over the learning process and individual course outcomes. For the instructor, online course management tools free in-class time for more productive teaching/learning activities and reduce after-class hours spent reviewing and correcting assignments, averaging and posting grades, fielding countless student questions about individual grades, and so on.

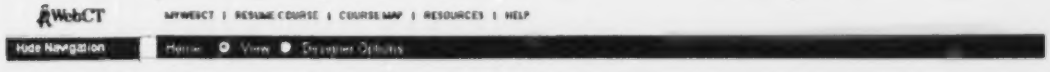
What is WebCT and what is a Hybrid Course?

In the last several years, technicians and design engineers have developed increasingly user-friendly software applications directly beneficial to educators, software that enables instructors to organize and incorporate internet resources into course content effectively. One of these, WebCT, is a software package designed as a suite of tools for general course management. It allows for the creation of a password protected, online environment for a course in any subject area. Its design includes mechanisms for administering a course (including tracking student participation and grades and providing a syllabus and course calendar), a delivery system for course content (including audio and video clips, self-correcting exercises, quizzes, links to informational and instructional web sites, announcements, and handouts), and a forum for student interaction online (through a general chat room, assigned discussion groups, and class email). It brings instructors and students together in a virtual classroom or learning community. Basically,

course management software allows instructors to do what they've always done, but more efficiently.

Other software similar to WebCT also exists such as: CourseInfo/Blackboard, Convene, TopClass, and LearningSpace/Lotus. WebCT, or any of the other courseware packages, is housed on a web server and accessed through the Internet on a web browser. The web server can be housed locally on an individual campus or, if this capacity does not exist, it can be hosted on another server in a separate location for a fee. Each installation of WebCT is licensed; fees for licensing vary according to the size of the institutional user. Similar course design can be accomplished with any of these packages but, because Auburn University has adopted WebCT for system-wide use, my experience has been with this particular software package.

Another feature incorporated into course management software is a template for a professionally designed and consistent page layout. WebCT, for example, features: a menu bar at the top of the screen (with *Mywebct, Resume Course, Resources, Course Map,* and *Help*).



A navigation bar is located on the left of the screen (with a *Course* Menu listing the different pages that can be visited and facilitating movement among all of the available pages with a minimum of mouse clicks), a space at the top for the course title, a breadcrumbs list just below the title (to show where the user is and where he has been), and a content frame (that houses the majority of page content and material).

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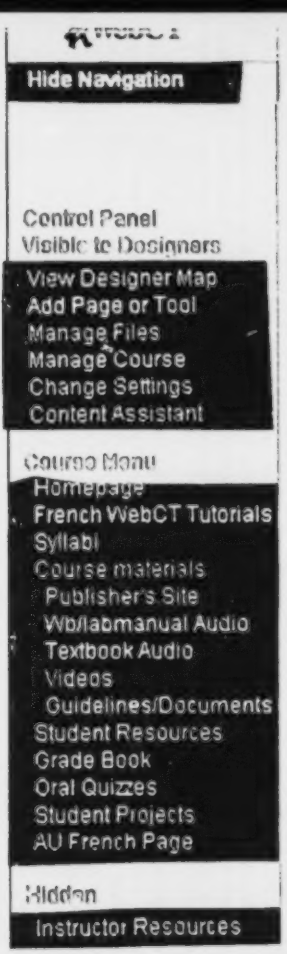

In addition to consistent and professional page layout, the course designer has a control panel with a suite of tools that s/he may use to set up the course. This group of tools has recently expanded with WebCT's newest version, the Campus Edition 4.0. The tool package of: *Designer Map, Add Page or Tool, Manage Files, Manage Course, Change Settings,* and *Content Assistant* now includes *Wizard* to guide the designer, while working on screen, through the steps necessary to accomplish specific tasks. The addition of this tool makes the course design process simple, even for novice users. The new package now also provides a mechanism for easily uploading and inserting content pages prepared off line in FrontPage, Dreamweaver, or PowerPoint.

Designer Map provides a chart of links, from a single page, to all the materials and tools that have been added to the course and allows an overview of the course components. *Add Page or Tool* permits the designer to add any number of additional pages as well as internal links to other pages within the private course site or on the worldwide web. *Manage Files* opens the file cabinet where files of documents or images can be uploaded, downloaded, or simply stored for possible future use in the course. *Manage Course* brings up a site from which the designer may add or subtract instructors (in case, for example, of multiple instructors or teaching assistants assigned to different sections of a single course), track and manage student activity, create and maintain a grade book that functions much like an excel spreadsheet. The grade book automatically

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calculates student grades and posts them onto individual student pages. Within *Manage Course*, instructors also can create, upload, download, or transfer course files. *Change Settings* provides options for customizing the course and its look. *Content Assistant* links to a special hub of content material for a variety of different disciplines. Users are invited to borrow from and contribute to this bank of material. In addition to all of these tools, WebCT software includes a file of images and icons that are readily accessed, copyright free, and can be inserted into the site design for added visual appeal. One other feature added to the newest version of WebCT is a *Browser Checker*. Because some browsers have posed problems interfacing with WebCT in the past, the software now automatically checks compatibility of the user's browser and provides an opportunity to download another one.

Support Material Needed

If an instructor chooses to create a course site on the open web s/he will need some web page design tools such as those provided by Netscape Composer, Microsoft FrontPage, or Macromedia Dreamweaver. For those using the Netscape browser, Composer is a standard feature requiring no additional software. Those using Internet Explorer may purchase Dreamweaver or FrontPage. Each of these offers a somewhat different suite of tools for site design, some more developed and sophisticated than others. FrontPage and Dreamweaver, for example, include a selection of page templates and image editing capability. Dreamweaver provides tools for creating a side navigation bar and a menu bar at the top of the page. As with a password protected WebCT site, an open-web site must be housed on a server, either one that belongs to the institution or one

that is leased from another location. These sites, of course, have no element of privacy and are open to, literally, anyone in the world.

In order to implement a hybrid, or web-supported course, students and instructor will need a minimum of technical equipment including: a computer with speakers, a browser (either Netscape or Internet Explorer), an Internet Service Provider, and a telephone line (for dial-up modems) or cable connection. It may be necessary to download some plug-ins to enable certain applications such as audio, video, or pdf files. If the course includes video files, students will need a broad-band or high-speed connection such as DSL for viewing. For maximum functionality, a Pentium class processor and 64 MB of RAM, or greater, is recommended.

Using a course tools package, an instructor can design a course to be taught completely online, for distance learning, or to be taught as a hybrid course, with some aspects of the course taught online and others in a classroom setting. Although the open web does not permit the element of privacy and control that can be achieved with closed-circuit, password-restricted course software, an instructor can design a hybrid, or web-supported, course provided that /he has access to a server where the site design can be stored and managed. In either case, the designer of the course would need some training in web design, some experience or training with a word processor such as Microsoft Word or Word Perfect, and would, of course, need to obtain copyright permission from the publisher of course materials to make them available on the open web.

Certain features, such as student access to his/her individual grade record, can only be implemented through the course management software and cannot be offered on the open web. Course management software also simplifies the process of course design

by offering a template for basic course layout, appropriate to any discipline, complete with mechanisms for implementing specific types of content modules, including the grade sheet. Academic publishers today are quite aware of the different course management packages, and many have designed their material to be compatible with these. Often, the publisher will provide an expert to help with implementation of its course materials into these management packages. Increasingly, publishers are providing modules (quizzes, workbooks, video clips, and activities) that can be readily inserted into the software with just a few mouse clicks. Student interaction with these modules is then automatically evaluated and posted into the course grade sheet. Again, this feature further clears the instructor's daily task list and gives students a greater sense of autonomy and control in the learning process.

Organizing Course Content for Integration into Hybrid or Web Supported Format

As with most organizational projects, starting with a list is most helpful. For any course, and particularly a web-enhanced course, a careful listing of all course components and content items will help to ensure that all aspects of the course are addressed in the general site design. In a list of course components, for example, the list might include syllabus, textbook, workbook/lab manual, audio CDs, video program, testing program, transparencies, publisher's web site, open web sites that relate to the course, handouts, and so on.

After listing or compiling various course components, answering a few basic questions can be helpful in organizing the course and determining design goals. For example, how many chapters of the textbook will be covered in the course and how is each of those chapters subdivided. What kinds of activities will students perform for each

segment? How many quizzes and exams will take place? Will any of these be on line? Testing programs provided by the publisher generally include various types of quizzes, chapter tests, and a final exam. Will all, or part, of these be incorporated into the course? What types of assignments and activities will the course require? Ancillary materials provided by the publisher, such as workbooks, generally provide both writing and listening activities. How many of these will students perform on line? How will they be graded? Some publishers now make available electronic workbooks that can be uploaded into course software and that are automatically corrected/graded and recorded for each student when integrated into the course software. Will the course include video clips prepared as part of the textbook package? How will these be made available to students and what kind of follow-up activity will they be required to do? Will participation be required and determine a portion of the students grade? In what ways will participation be assessed?

In addition to course materials, most publishers have developed web sites that correspond to and complement the textbook. These sites are often multi-dimensional, including activities designed to provide additional practice with vocabulary and grammatical structures and forms as well as to encourage cultural exposure and exploration. In fact, richness of content in general can be overwhelming and require some selection and elimination on the part of the course instructor. Because a hybrid or web-enhanced course combines traditional, face-to-face classroom experience with online activity, thoughtful choices regarding division of course content into the two domains will impact overall effectiveness of the student and teacher experience.

Principles of Web Site Design

Once the content list is complete, and a decision has been made regarding those parts of the course to be accessed or performed online, the next step in planning a course site involves its organizational architecture. This architectural plan or organization will determine how effectively students are able to find and access course content. When planning and mapping the site, an important consideration is form; form should follow function. That is, how students are to use the site should determine how the site looks. A well-designed site will be simple, elegant, and functional. Because the web is a scanning medium, users expect and respond best to abbreviated language (sometimes referred to as "chunks" of language) rather than lengthy prose–outlines, rather than paragraphs, for example. Another important point is visual appeal; users appreciate an uncluttered page that allows them to find desired information quickly, logically, and easily. Symmetry, contrast, and proximity also contribute to pleasing design.

Other factors that contribute to an appealing and user-friendly site include accessibility, maintenance, readability, and printability. Accessibility refers to design features that accommodate users with special needs or physical restrictions such as limited vision or blindness. Design strategies for accessibility may include use of the ALT attribute, for example, a pop up feature that provides text equivalent of an image. Consistency of page structure and standard HTML coding also allows non-visual browsers using screen readers to more easily interpret content. In general, site designers can facilitate readability by choosing universal fonts compatible with all computer models and by considering appropriate contrast of text color on background color, avoiding colors that create difficulty for users who may be color-blind.

To make site participation rewarding for all users, regular maintenance will eliminate, or at least substantially reduce, frustration due to out-of-date information, broken links, and so on. Attention to a few other details will also enhance the experience. For example, using low profile headers will allow maximum visibility of content without the necessity of scrolling downward. Optimally compressing all images will decrease download time for those with dial-up connections. Making documents available as pdf files will preserve original format and will permit users to print either the entire document or only selected pages. Providing a link to the site where users can download a free Adobe Acrobat Reader will further facilitate the printing process for those who may not already have this tool on their computer.

A hierarchical site structure, in which content is grouped into main categories and subsections, is easy for users to understand and navigate. In this design, organizational categories are posted on the home page and linked to related content on subsequent pages. An efficient hierarchical design situates content only a page or two away from the organizational page. On the other hand, if all content is accessible from the home page, users can be overwhelmed by a complex menu page that offers a smorgasbord of unrelated links. Thoughtfully chosen headings or groupings should give users an overview of the site's content and lead them logically to desired information.

A Successful Working Model for First Year French Language Courses

Below is an example of a homepage developed for a first-year French language course. This site is used by students in both first and second semesters of the first year sequence.

Three principals guided this site design: simplicity, clarity, and visual interest. Structured hierarchically, the site organizes content within main categories that are then fleshed out in subsequent pages. Importantly, all of the information contained in this site is available with a maximum of three mouse clicks. As a unifying motif, and for visual appeal, the site makes use of thumbnail images of French art. The site title derives from the course textbook, Prentice Hall's *Chez Nous: branché sur le monde francophone.* The subtitle clearly indicates that it is intended for those students enrolled in both FLFR 1010 and 1020, first and second semesters of the first year sequence. Just below, a map of the world highlights those countries where French is a primary or official language. Five icons link users to all aspects of course content.

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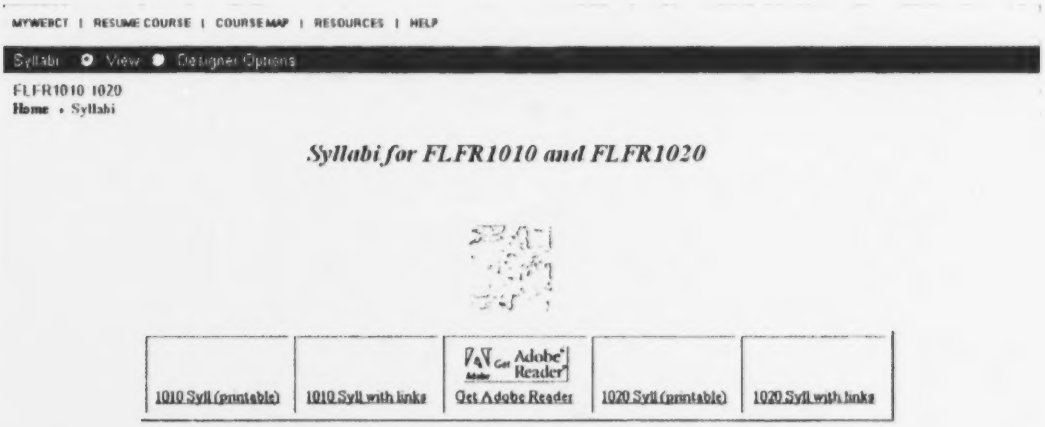
The first icon on this homepage directs users to a page where students will find syllabi for both semesters of the first-year French sequence. The syllabi are available in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pdf format, for easy printability, and in html or web page format. The html or web page syllabus has been embedded with hotlinks to supplemental help with specific grammatical structures. The web today is an amazingly rich resource of French language material that has been developed by individual instructors, various textbook publishers, the French cultural ministry, and others. Locating various sites and making them easily available to students is a time-consuming task, but can pay dividends in student involvement with the language and, ultimately, with language acquisition levels. The page with syllabi also contains a link to a site where students can download a free Adobe Reader for accessing pdf files.

The second icon on the homepage directs students to a page containing all required course material: publisher's web site, audio files for the workbook/lab manual, audio files corresponding to textbook material, videos, and a page of course information with guidelines and handouts that can be printed or read from the screen. From these links the students go directly to an index from which they select the particular audio, video file or document that corresponds to the chapter being studied.

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These audio and video files are stored on the university server and linked to the lab/media center in the Foreign Language Department. In the media center, access to these files is password protected, permitting admittance to only officially enrolled Auburn University students. Although this system of storing and limiting access is preferred by Auburn University, WebCT software is capable of housing audio and video files. These can be prepared on Respondus software, for example, and uploaded into WebCT. That is, in fact, how oral comprehension quizzes for this course were created, those grouped under the icon Oral Quizzes.

The third icon on the homepage directs students to a page organized with panel of supplemental links intended to further enrich the student language experience by providing a links to a variety of sites. These do not involve required course activities; rather, they are for students who may desire extra help or who are simply curious and motivated to explore and to achieve beyond what is required. Included among these activities, for example, is: an index of sites where students can find extra help and

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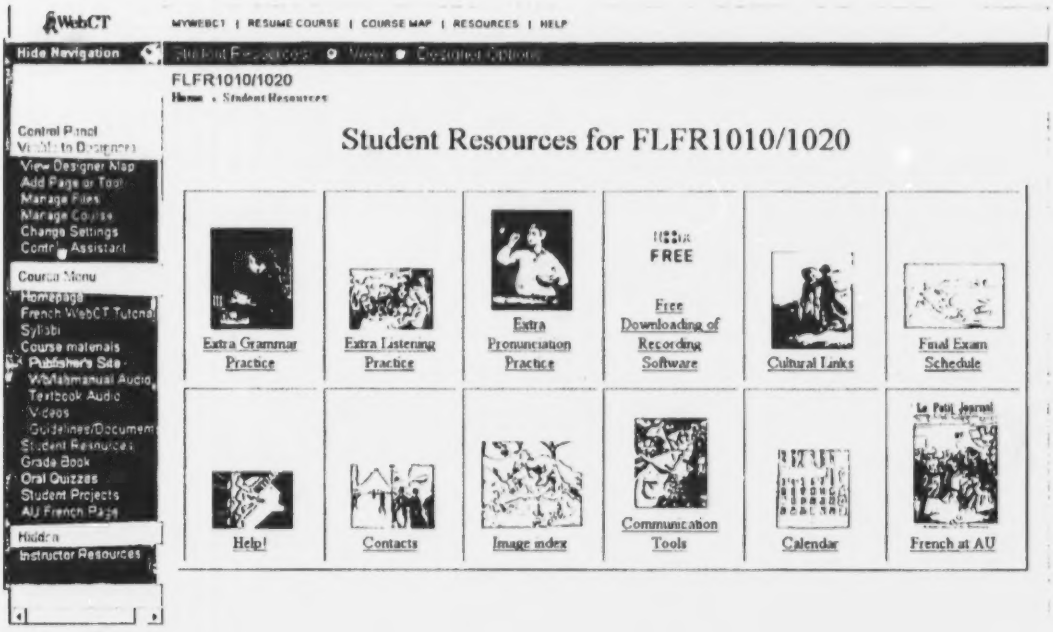

practice with grammatical structures; an index of sites where they can find various kinds of audio recordings; an index to selected cultural links; an index of images used in the site that will identify the artist and link them to Artcyclopedia where they may find more information about that artist; a page listing contact information for all first year instructors and for upper-level students who are available as tutors; a link to the university final exam schedule; a link to the WebCT calendar; a link to WebCT communication tools such as class Email, Discussion, and Chat; and a link to Help with using WebCT tools, making accents on the computer, and so on. Also included on this page is a link to a site from which students may download free software that will enable them to record their voice and email that recording to their instructor (or to others in the class).

The fourth icon on the homepage links each student user to his/her personal grade record. As course content is completed, graded, and posted by the instructor, WebCT makes this information immediately available to individual students. A further feature

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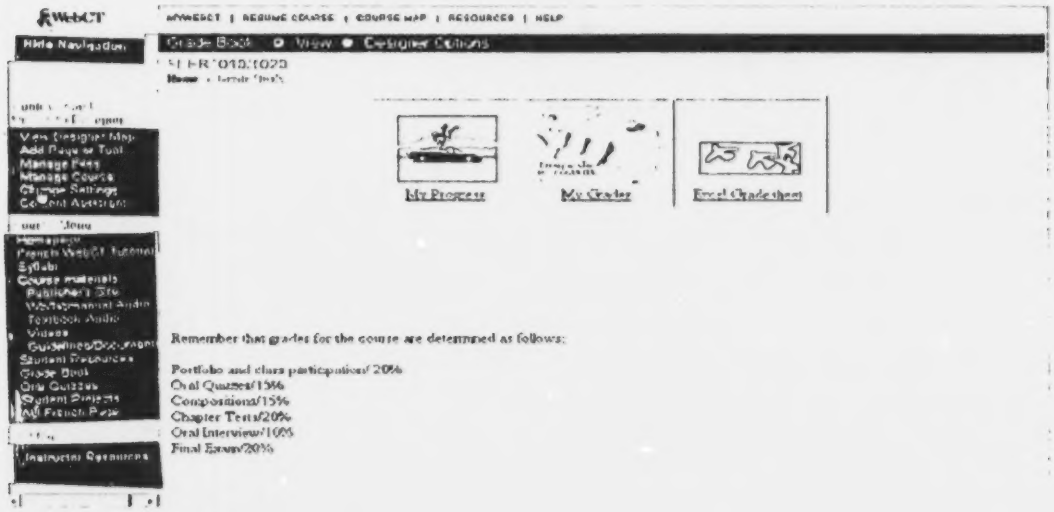
that WebCT provides is a mechanism for making available to students a report of class performance through which individuals can compare their performance with the class as a whole. Instructors can decide whether or not to activate this feature. Also available to



instructors and students is a tool that tracks the number of times that individual students visit each page of the site, providing a mechanism for accurately measuring student participation and involvement with various course components.

The fifth icon on the homepage links students to an index of oral comprehension quizzes that are a required part of the course. They must take one quiz near the end of

To begin a quiz or survey, click on the hyperlinked quiz title. If a quiz or survey is not hyperlinked, it is not available. To view the results of a quiz, click on the Completed hyperlink under Attempts.

Title	Availability	Duration	Grade	Attempts
Site Assessment	Unavailable	---	---	
Oral Quizzes				
Oral Quiz 1	From: September 8, 2003 6:00am To: September 9, 2003 6:00am	25 minutes	/14	Completed: 0 Remaining: 1
Oral Quiz 2	From: September 24, 2003 6:00am To: September 25, 2003 6:00am	25 minutes	/16	Completed: 0 Remaining: 1
Oral Quiz 3	From: October 10, 2003 6:00am To: October 11, 2003 6:00am	25 minutes	/6	Completed: 0 Remaining: 1
Oral Quiz 4	From: October 27, 2003 6:00am To: October 28, 2003 6:00am	25 minutes	/6	Completed: 0 Remaining: 1
Oral Quiz 5	From: November 14, 2003 6:00am To: November 15, 2003 6:00am	25 minutes	/6	Completed: 0 Remaining: 1
Oral Quiz 6	Unavailable	Unlimited	/4	

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each chapter in the textbook. As mentioned earlier, instructors created these quizzes using Respondus software and then uploaded them into WebCT. WebCT provides a mechanism that allows instructors to predetermine and to limit when students may access quizzes, length of time they are permitted to take the quiz, and number of attempts they may make. An internal mechanism for creating quizzes exists within WebCT, and instructors may also create them directly in this program. The mechanism is somewhat more circuitous, however, and may require a little more patience on the part of instructors creating them.

The sixth icon on the home page links users to a site where student work is featured. With permission from students, instructors can post student pictures, compositions, audio projects, and even video projects. With the aid of a digital camera, picture files can easily be uploaded and put on display to illustrate and accompany student writing projects. Auburn's foreign language media center has equipment students may use to make digital audio files that can be easily uploaded and made available in this space for other students to listen to, or they can use the free software made available to them on the Student Resources page. Access to peer projects is of particular interest when there are multiple sections of the same course and students can access the work of those in other classes. Displaying student work in this way also functions as a wonderful motivational tool, encouraging excellence and effectively making stars out of students.

The seventh icon on the homepage directs students to the university's French Department web site. Accessible on the open web, the department page provides a wealth of links and information of interest to French students at any level. This page repeats the art motif used in the WebCT course site and duplicates some of the course links,

effectively creating a kind of back up resource in the event of system failure. The scope of the design for the department page, however, is broader and targets a larger number of users. As noted earlier, an open web site cannot make individual grade reports available, so grade reports and oral comprehension quizzes are not included here. The final icon on the homepage facilitates exit from the course site with a link to the university's homepage and the Internet Explorer browser.

Finally, at the bottom of the Course Menu on the left of the screen, a link that is hidden from student view provides access to index of resource material for instructor use. This particularly useful tool gives instructors ready access to forms and documents used in conducting managerial tasks and furnishes a list of links to sites of professional organizations, publications, and conferences.

Conclusion

Although the design process for a hybrid course similar to the one described here requires considerable planning, some basic familiarity with technological applications, and an appreciable investment of time, the end result is definitely worth it. Benefits to students and instructors, although difficult to measure in concrete terms, really cannot be overstated. For the instructor, course administration or management becomes significantly more efficient: reducing time and effort spent on routine tasks; automatically organizing, maintaining, and making accessible various material components of the course; and, to a large extent, transferring responsibility for practice and learning to individual students. For students, web-enhanced courses offer empowerment. Students will find that they have increased accessibility to course materials and to supplemental help and practice with language difficulties, facilitated

contact with classmates and instructor, immediate feedback through online grade reporting and self-correcting practice exercises, and a diversity of interactive instructional tasks in self-directed format that all enrich the learning experience and make possible a higher level of language proficiency and a greater degree of cultural awareness.

The most formidable obstacle for the uninitiated is likely to be fear and/or distrust of technology itself. Fortunately, many institutions and educational systems offer help to faculty who would like to become more skilled by providing them access to software and hardware, and some training in their use. Certainly, it is worthwhile to investigate the level of assistance and commitment available wherever the web-supported course is to be offered. Various agencies and foundations also support technology-based educational projects. Some supply grants that might be used to purchase hardware and software, pay for training with technical equipment and applications, and even fund project assessment. (Possible sources for outside funding, and their contact information are included in the notes to this article, along with a brief list of useful search engines and subject-specific search directories for locating relevant course material.) For those who are more independent and auto-didactic, the web itself offers a treasure of resources for self-instruction and training. WebCT, for example, maintains a web site rich in information and tutorials that can aid even the most timid novice. Again, the notes section at the end of this article lists the URL for some of these course software sites. And finally, the bibliography includes a number of books that provide detailed information on various aspects of course design and implementation.

Notes

Possible Sources of Outside Funding:

- U.S. Department of Education [http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/FIPSE/LAAP]
  (Grant: Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnerships)
- Alfred P. Sloan Foundation [http://www.sloan.org/programs/edu_careers.htm]
  (Grant: Learning Outside the Classroom)
- Andrew W. Mellon Fondation [http://www.mellon.org/cutt.html]
  (Grant: Initiative on Cost Effective Uses of Technology in Teaching)

Courseware Sites:

- CourseInfo [http://www.blackboard.com]
- LearningSpace [http://www.lotus.com]
- WebCT [http://www.webct.com]

Web Page Design Software Sites:

- Netscape Composer [http://www.netscape.com]
- FrontPage [http://www.microsoft.com]
- Dreamweaver [http://www.macromedia.com]

Popular Search Engines:

- http://www.altavista.com
- http://www.google.com/
- http://www.metacrawler.com

Subject-specific Directories:

- http://www.yahoo.com and www.yahoo.fr
- http://www.about.com
- http://www.artcyclopedia.com
- http://www.searchedu.com

Free User Tools:

- Acrobat Reader (pdf document reader)
  http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html
- Quicktime (video reader, mov files)
  http://www.quicktime.com
- RealPlayer (audio reader, ra and rm files)
  http://www.real.com
- Helix (audio recorder)
  http://forms.real.com/rnforms/products/tools/producerbasic/index.html?key=4Q68A1058907200

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